

# *Tan Son Nhut Air Base*



**February 17th, 1968**

**Charlie Flight**

**David M. Dowdell**

**377th SPS, Tan Son Nhut, 1967-1968:** On February 17th, 1968, I reported for Guardmount with Charlie Flight/Charlie Sector at the rear of the 1300 area. I had just got off of a day long Reserve-QRT (Quick Response Team) assignment, housed at the Old French Fort, and was not looking forward to humping the north revetments for the next 12 hours.



My only solace was the fact that I was going to be posted next to Chuck Akins. He was also from Ohio and we could endure the long shift together.\* The Squadron had been placed on 12 hours shifts, since the onset of the Tet Offensive assault on the perimeter. Up to this point time off had been nonexistent.

MSgt Garcia surprised Charlie Sector troops when he announced that a few of us were going to be laid-in for the shift. My name wasn't called, but I knew we'd all get some mental health time in the near future.

Posting went uneventful. I was dropped off along the North Revetments, the old concrete revetments that paralleled the MLR bunker line, at a one-man M16 bunker. There was a lot of activity along the old concrete revetments that housed a variety of aircraft. I

recall that I was posted next to an RB-66 photo reconnaissance bombers, and a few RF-101's, parked in the revetments that made up my post area.

Across from the north revetments was the RF-4C Phantom aircraft parking areas. This revetment area was one of the newer reinforced steel structures. These were exposed revetments with no Quonset -hut-type roofs. Air Force maintenance personnel appeared to be as busy over there too! I quickly realized that with all the light-all units and personnel around the revetments it was going to be a noisy night.

Around midnight, the activity around the north revetments declined. The RF-4C area was still pretty active with the light-all units illuminating the area like an athletic field.

Tan Son Nhut Air Base was one of the most active airports in the world. Rumor had it that it was as busy as O'Hare in Chicago. Take-offs and landings were occurring around the clock.

I took the opportunity to walk over to Akins post area and shoot the bull for a while about Jan 31st Tet 1968 attack, and among other things, the AK47s we captured then. We sort of met half way so we could hustle back to our bunkers if MSgt Garcia or a Golf Unit drove out to the revetment area.

Akins and I had met half way so we could watch our post area and look out for the man. Shortly after we began to talk about home we saw a jeep crossing the high speed taxi way to the western post on the north revetments. Time to move back to our bunkers.

I was walking back to my M16 bunker when I saw a huge fireball erupt in the C-130 parking ramp in Bravo Sector. I was about 50 feet

from the M16 bunker when incoming rounds began impacting out on the C-130 parking ramp. For a millisecond I thought there was a ground accident until I heard the ominous sound of incoming fire. I could see the distant explosions by looking directly down the high speed taxiway. In a matter of seconds, I heard incoming rounds dropping towards the North Revetments and the RF4C revetment area. The rounds began impacting all over Charlie Sector, and secondary explosions began almost immediately.

I dove to the ground when the first volley of 122mm rockets slammed into the aircraft parking areas. The incoming rounds appeared to be walking across the revetment areas. My first thought was that they were zeroing in on the light-all units in the RF-4C area. I had to get to my bunker.

I began low-crawling across the asphalt surface toward the M16 bunker, twenty yards away. A 122mm round suddenly impacted directly in front of an RB-66, lifting me up off the ground. The next series of incoming rounds impacted in the north revetment area and MLR, and that was the last thing I remembered. I was knocked unconscious and received shrapnel wounds from the round that must have hit about 20-30 meters from me.

I recall awaking in an ambulance at the Base Dispensary. Some medic was yelling in my ears and the entire medical staff was scurrying around. There were wounded personnel everywhere. I was treated for shrapnel wounds to the head, wrist and forearm. The doctor told me most of the wounds were fragments of the aircraft and bits of the asphalt ramp. I had been peppered with minute fragments of asphalt similar to a bird shot round from a shotgun.

I was also experiencing severe back pain. The doctors cut off my fatigue shirt and rolled me over to find a large purplish softball-sized bruise on my lower back near my right kidney. They believed that I had been hit with a heavy, blunt chunk of debris. I was held overnight and part of the next day. I finally told one of the medics that the doctor told me to go back to the 1300 area. I hadn't been cleared for release, but I had been treated for the superficial wounds and wanted to get the hell out of there. The medic cleared me to leave and I caught a ride back to the Squadron Area.

MSgt Garcia turned my web gear and M16 over to me. I put my web gear back on and was checking my magazine pouches when I lacerated my arm on something. In checking my gear I found a loaded M16 magazine with a quarter-sized chunk of shrapnel wedged into the magazine. The head of the M16 rounds had been shaved off from the fragment, but the magazine and rounds stopped the fragment. That magazine was on the back of my web gear directly over my right kidney. The deep back bruise was the result of the impact of the fragment into the magazine.

In the early hours of the night of 18 February 68, Tan Son Nhut Air Base was hit with over 100 rounds of 122mm rockets and 75mm recoilless rifle fire in a twenty minutes period. Central Security Control's (CSC) radio was knocked out and generators were turned on as auxiliary power. TSgt Bloom can be heard calling for generator power and directing response to the attack on a tape recording made by an unknown Airman during the attack. Newspaper accounts later disclosed that 30 aircraft were damaged or destroyed and over 40 military personnel were killed. This was the first major shelling experienced at the Air Base since 1966.



I was scanning through the 377th SPS web pages, earlier this week, when I saw that a Chuck Akins had signed in on the guest book. I hadn't talked with Chuck since 1968 when I was wounded. Back then, I had been placed on light duty and assigned to CSC. I was riding with an Army EOD team until I was sent TDY to Vung Tau Air Field. Chuck DEROS'd out and we never saw each other again.

I e-mailed Chuck last weekend and he responded back. We talked on the phone for nearly 2 hours, a few days ago, and he told me that during the shelling he moved over to my position and found me unconscious and bleeding. Chuck grabbed me by my web gear harness and dragged me to an impact crater. After the shelling he waved down the ambulance and got me medical care. Chuck and I are going to get together after the Holidays. I think I owe him a dinner.

I obtained an audio tape of the radio traffic, taped by TSgt Bloom at CSC, from an Instructor at the Security Forces School, in Lackland Air Force Base. I used to avoid going to fireworks shows-right after Vietnam--but now I can tolerate both listening to the audio tape and enjoying a fireworks show with my Grand Children.

I received the Purple Heart and the Air Force Commendation Medal during my tour of duty with the 377th SPS. I look back on my year in Vietnam with much pride in that I served with the best Air Force SPS in Southeast Asia.

David M. Dowdell

377th SPS  
11/67 to 11/68

\* I can recall when I was stationed with the 410th Bomb Wing, at K.I. Sawyer Air Force Base, located in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and we were pulling a midnight shift in the alert bomber area. Around 4: 00 a.m., the close-in sentries would walk out onto the middle of the alert ramp and 'socialize' before the sector Sergeant would come out of the crew billets to recheck posts. I think we all did it one time or another. I was done mostly for the need to talk with someone after countless hours humping a B-52 or a KC-135. Needless to say, a lot of A3C Security Policemen didn't give such things, as leaving your post, much thought. I remember one night at K.I. Sawyer everyone in the B-52 alert area converged out in the middle of the aircraft ramp area to shoot the bull. The Sector Sergeant was seen getting in his truck at the alert billets. Someone on distant perimeter yelled "here come the man," and we all hustled back to our aircraft. About an hour later the sun slowly rose in the chilly winter morning. We had experienced light snow off and on throughout the night. As the sun rose and the darkness lifted you could see a series of footprints, leading out from each aircraft to the center of the concrete parking ramp, and back to the bombers. Busted! We all got a good ass chewing from the Flight Chief after he drove out onto the alert area and saw the evidence of our overnight rendezvous.

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